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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000477

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DA,WA FORMING PARTNERSHIP WITH HOPE OF TWO RIVERS
IN KARBALA

REF: BAGHDAD 364

Classified By: PRT Karbala Team Leader John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

¶1. (C) Summary: The State of Law Coalition (Da'wa) and the Hope of the Two Rivers (disaffected Da'wa, tribal and others) each won nine Provincial Council (PC) seats in last month's provincial elections. Both separately have announced that their lists may form a governing partnership. State of Law also claims to have reached an understanding with the top vote-getter, independent candidate Yousif al-Haboubi. The three lists together would control 19 of 27 seats, one more than the two-thirds needed for a veto-proof majority, but consensus on who will be governor has not been reached. Some here are worried violence could result if the Sadrists Independent Free People's Trend list -- which Da'wa also was courting publicly -- feels jilted by a State Law-Hope deal, but the Sadrists apparently already have extracted other agreements that may assure their quiescence. End Summary.

State Law-Hope Partnership in the Making

¶2. (SBU) The Independent High Electoral Commission revealed on February 19 that the new, 27-seat Karbala PC will include nine members from the State of Law coalition list (including current Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khazali), nine from the Hope of the Two Rivers list, four from the Independent Free People's Trend list, four from the ISCI-led Martyr of the Imam Ali Shrine list, and Yousif Majid al-Haboubi. On February 22, Agriculture Director General Amal al-Din al-Hir, a currently serving PC member who won a seat on the new Council as head of the State of Law slate, announced that his list would "team up" with the Hope of the Two Rivers as well as with Haboubi. In an apparent reference to the Independent Free People's Trend list supported by followers of extremist Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, al-Hir described Hope of the Two Rivers as "closer to our ideas and goals." As elsewhere in southern Iraq, State of Law in Karbala had previously acknowledged that it was seeking an accommodation with the Sadrists (reftel).

¶3. (C) Also on February 22, Hope of the Two Rivers spokesman Mohammad Tahir al-Asadi announced that his list had entered into "serious meetings" with the other winning lists, terming a partnership with the State of Law as probable "if we reach good understandings in the coming days." Together with al-Haboubi, a State of Law-Hope coalition would control 19 of Karbala's 27 PC seats, creating a two-thirds-plus-one, veto-proof majority. Former governor and provincial UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) representative Ali Kamonah told PRT members of February 23 that State of Law and Hope are at loggerheads over who will be the next governor; each is claiming the top slot. However, he continued, both lists are considering a compromise proposal wherein an outsider not currently involved in Karbala politics would be selected. The UNAMI representative said that there is "almost zero"

chance that Haboubi will become governor because, as a former regime official, he is trusted neither by State of Law nor by Hope.

How Will the Sadrists React?

¶4. (C) Citing a variety of citizen-in-the-street contacts, a reliable Iraqi employee of the PRT on February 22 said locals are worried Sadrists will react violently to their apparent jilting by the State of Law-Hope coalition. Memories of the militia battles that rocked the province as recently as summer 2007 remain fresh and, although security here is good, no one wishes to see progress in rebuilding the province slowed by threats or acts of violence. However, Kamonah told PRT members on February 23 that State of Law had preempted any potential hard feelings over its deal with Hope by first meeting with the Independent Free People's Trend to see what it would take to guarantee the Sadrists' continued political quiescence. According to UNAMI Kamonah, the Sadrists already have extracted their political pound of flesh from Da'wa: The agreement to expedite closure of criminal cases stemming from the deadly clashes during Shabaniyah in 2007 between Sadr's al-Mahdi Army militia and its rival, the ISCI-backed Badr Organization. (Note: Kamonah had previously told the PRT that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki dispatched a delegation of judges and lawyers to Karbala in early February with instructions to seal this deal with the Independent Free People's Trend; see reftel. End Note.)

¶5. (C) The Sadrists' effective political sidelining pales in comparison to ISCI's isolation and near-irrelevance here.

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ISCI saw its hopes of displacing Da'wa in Karbala decisively -- and, perhaps, irrevocably -- dashed in the elections. Widely (if somewhat unfairly) blamed for fueling militia-generated chaos with Iranian money, ISCI and its Badr vanguard were fortunate, via their Martyr of the Imam Ali Shrine list, to have won any Council seats. The molten animus that continues to characterize relations between the Sadrists and ISCI/Badr here probably precludes their forming an alliance, nor would an alliance have any benefit given the small number of seats each party controls.

Comment

¶6. (C) As we previously have noted, in the landscape of shifting allegiances and strange bedfellows that is Karbala politics, uncertainty is the only certainty. Nonetheless, a State Law-Hope Coalition makes sense for both lists; their differences involve personalities (Hope was formed in reaction to Governor Aqeel's firing of provincial ISF commander MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat al-Hasnawi), not policies. Participation in such an alliance also would serve Haboubi's interests. Though he was the only "list" to garner double-digit support at the polls, he controls only one council vote, lacks allies and -- if he does not play ball -- risks marginalization akin to that awaiting his new PC colleagues from the Independent Free People's Trend and, especially, the Martyr of the Imam Ali Shrine lists. End Comment.

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